DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 028 CS 210 325

AUTHOR Morgan, Lorraine; And Others
TITLE Pushing the Write Button: Writing-across-the-Curriculum.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biology; *Content Area Writing; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Peer Evaluation; *Program Development; Science Instruction; Speech Skills; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Stanford University CA; *Writing across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

In 1984 the Human Biology program at Stanford University launched a writing across-the-curriculum project with a year-long writing-intensive introductory class. The immediate objectives were to (1) develop students' writing fluency by demanding more writing, (2) improve the quality of all student writing by increasing attention to the writing process and to written work, and (3) help students understand that writing is a valuable way to analyze and deepen knowledge of course content. During the first year the program secured space for a writing resource center where the writing assistants could confer with students, teaching assistants, and faculty. Ways to develop students' speaking capabilities were also explored, and the program focused on developing a learning resource center. The Human Biology program also purchased video equipment to use in making pilot training tapes. The program has documented evidence that it is making a difference in student performance on essay examinations and in written assignments. Because Human Biology is an interdisciplinary program, it exemplifies how writing can be integrated across the curriculum. (AEW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED280028

Pushing the Write Button

WRITING-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM

CONFERENCE on COLLEGE COMPOSITION and COMMUNICATION

March 19-21, 1987
Atlanta, Georgia

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lorraine Morgan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Program in Human Biology
Stanford University

CS 210325

Lorraine Morgan, Director of Writing Program
Bill Friar and Jean Kutner, Writing Assistants

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PUSHING THE WRITE BUTTON

In 1984, a gift earmarked for the improvement of undergraduate writing provided the Dean of Undergraduate Education at Stanford University, a strong advocate of attention to writing, the seed money she needed to launch a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum project. She enlisted the help of department chairs to identify courses and faculty who might be willing to engage in the project.

The then Chairman of the Program in Human Biology agreed to particapate in the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum venture with the provision that funding for an extra half-time teaching assistant would be provided. One of the largest undergraduate majors at Stanford, the Program in Human Biology studies the human organism through an integrated biological, behavioral, and social science approach. It examines the interactions of humans with their environment and explores the implications of these interactions for public policy. The Chairman selected the Core, a rigorous, year-long, 24 unit introductory class, to be the first Human Biology course to be identified as writing intensive.

The Core has two strands, referred to as the 'A-side,' which presents the biological material, and the 'B-side,' which studies the social and behavioral components. The course attracts a diverse group of approximately 300 students with wide-ranging educational interests and goals. Due to the scope and size of the Core, it is coordinated by six faculty members (two each quarter) with the aid of twelve teaching assistants. The Faculty Coordinators of the 'B-side' agreed to participate in the writing-intensive project with the provision that the management of the effort be conducted and coordinated by an administrator.

I was invited to be that administrator. I had often voiced concern about the quality of undergraduate writing and had already established higher standards of written products for the Honors Program and the Internship Program, both of which I had administrative responsibility for. Also my prior experience in program and curriculum development in other settings provided me with the confidence and optimism I needed to accept the appointment.

The Dean of Undergraduate Education arranged a workshop for faculty and teaching assistants before classes convened in the fall to introduce the philosophy of Writing-Across-the-Curriculum and provide help for those uneasy or unfamiliar with its tenants. Elaine Maimon, a leader in the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum movement, led the workshop orientation, and I was delighted to participate in a program whose approach matched my own thinking and one whose goals I could embrace fully. Unfortunately, the head 'B' teaching assistant and I were the only representatives from Human Biology to attend the initial preparation. Classes began the very next week and so we needed to move quickly.

A Writing Assistant was hired, modifications to the syllabus to include information about the writing efforts were made, and we were on our way to becoming officially engaged in the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum project. With such little lead time there was a definite urgency to explain to students and faculty what we were doing and to clarify what this new undertaking was going to involve.

We began by indicating what the objective of the project was to be and outlined what seemed to be reasonable and attainable procedures to achieve that goal.

We have revised that original goal slightly each succeeding year. Neither the goals nor the procedures were particularly revolutionary or apparently unfeasable to implement.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1984-85...Develop students' written fluency by demanding more writing and critiquing that writing more carefully.

1985-86...Improve the quality of all student writing by increased attention to the writing process and to written work.

...Help students understand that the process of writing is one way to study and learn content.

1986-87...Promote high standards of writing throughout the Program in Human Biology by increased attention to written work and to the idea of writing as a process.

...Help students understand that writing is a valuable way to analyze and deepen knowledge of course content.

Our goals seemed to be simple and forthright, but that did not diminish the need to address and try to resolve some genuine problems. Among our early frustrations were interpretations held by other members of Human Biology of what the new project was going to entail. There was a faculty

member who assumed initially that installation of a writing-intensive component into a course meant that that we should provide remediation. Another held the belief that all enrolled students must be able to write well or they would not have been admitted, and yet another thought that Human Biology should not be teaching English.

The first Writing Assistant was a graduate student unfamiliar with the course content and confronted by course TAs who saw her as the source of additional work. At the same time, it was difficult to dispel the notion held by the Core teaching assistants that the Writing Assistant was hired to grade course papers. Each year, there are changes in all categories of personnel which is especially difficult on fledgling projects that are still being shaped. Peer review was a new concept for students and TAs alike and was met with mixed reactions. The sheer number of students enrolled in the class was in itself a logistic nightmare.

During the next two-and-a-half years, we tried to plan and think through a variety of approaches to integrate the writing-intensive element into the Core. Before we examine the procedures, it is important that we consider several events that had significant impact on the project.

The Writing Resource Center

During the first year of the Writing-Across-the Curriculum effort, we were able to secure space and funds to adapt one of the small rooms on the main floor of the Program's quarters for use as a Writing Resource Center. The Writing Assistants use this space to confer with students, TAs, and faculty. The refurnished Center houses a small library of writing reference materials that students are encouraged to use to resolve

questions about mechanics and style. Professors' works-in-progress are on display as well as samples of student products. Having a home of our own may be the single most important element that establishes writing as an integral part of Human Biology's curriculum.

Hard Science as Writing Intensive

Just a few days before the beginning of classes during our second year in operation a second breakthrough occurred. An adjustment in teaching arrangements resulted in a Fall Coordinator who agreed to extend the writing intensive element to the 'A-side' of the Core. Few people had difficulty accepting writing in the social sciences but, being legitimate in the natural sciences bordered on a coup. Problems did accompany this development because it came as a surprise to the 'A' teaching assistants when they returned to campus from summer break, and did not have a chance to attend the University's orientation session.

In addition to the creation of the Writing Center and the expansion of writing into the 'A-side' of the Core, operating procedures were specified and have been arranged arranged in three categories: (1) Limited value, (2) Successful, (3) Revision required.

PROCEDURES

Limited value--Discontinued

1) Institute a limited enrollment, one-unit pilot writing course under the direction of the Writing Assistant.

The one-unit pilot course that we tried the first year was effective for only the limited number of students who could participate. It was not an economical use of the Writing Assistant's time nor did a writing skills course of this nature support our stated goal.

Successful

The next category includes the procedures that worked exceptionally well.

1) Provide support and guidance to the Teaching Assistants by
    a) suggesting exercises to integrate writing as a way to learn content into section meetings.
    b) assisting in framing questions for examinations and written assignments.
    c) providing help in the composition and the evaluation of papers and exams.
    d) preparing written guidelines for TAs to share with students
    e) distributing reprints and handouts to TAs to introduce new ideas and sustain motivation.

2) Engage in outreach activities for students enrolled in the Core by
    a) conducting topic-specific workshops and lectures.
    b) writing personalized letters to individuals offering special help.
    c) arranging tutorials at student convenience.
    d) offering drop-in office hours at a selected dormitory prior to assignment due dates.

3) Design and implement peer review.

In retrospect, the most successful approach is the direct support provided the Core teaching assistants by the writing programs' personnel. Given the complexities of the organization of the course, the collaborative relationship with the TAs is the key way to integrate attention to writing into the course. Patient, consistent communication has resulted in a close working relationship between the two staffs.

Marginal-Good Ideas That Need To Be Revised

1) Institute a self-assessment step into the peer review process.

Strategies need to be developed by which students can check their work in progress to determine if they are using the same criteria in writing their papers as the TAs will use in evaluating them.

2) Publish collection of best papers to demonstrate the value and importance of good writing.

Collected works are excellent models and motivators for students, but there is insufficient time for students to revise their papers so that they are polished enough to serve as models. Plans are being made to provide students with time for adequate revisions next quarter.

3) Initiate a portfolio system that will enable students to see how their writing develops over the course of their undergraduate career.

Collect all major pieces of writing into individual student folders.

It was hoped that students, faculty advisors, and other academic staff could refer to the students' papers to note progress and provide additional feedback. Persuading people that reading products that students wrote earlier is a worthy investment of time has met with resistence. A different approach will need to be devised.

THE NEXT STEPS

Collaborative Learning

Human Biology is considering ways to strengthen the beginnings of our writing program by recruiting and training peer reviewers. The effectiveness of peer review could be strengthened if students were given the tools they need to provide constructive suggestions to authors of papers. There may be ways in which we could move toward developing a Learning Resource Center where students would come into the Human Biology offices for a variety of needs. A peer Learning Assistance Program that matches Core alumni tutors, (Learning Assistants), with students who request help with content already exits. The Learning Assistants Program could serve as a model for recruiting and training writing tutors.

Oral Communication

As we work toward strengthening our Writing-Across-the-Curriculum efforts, we are also exploring ways to develop our students speaking capabilities.

Opportunities exist for students to give oral reports in selected upper division classes and presentations for Honors projects but there seems to be a genuine need to link more closely the thinking, speaking, and writing processes. The introduction of attention to oral communication in a course that has such a large enrollment will again need to be centered in the sections conducted by the TAs.

Improved Evaluation System

We have collected data since 1984 and have documented evidence that we are making a difference in student performance on essay examinations and in written assignments. Student evaluations collected at the end of the second year of the writing-intensive effort revealed that on a three point rating scale, using one as not helpful and three as very helpful, students rated help of the writings assistants at 2.45 with a standard deviation of .568 and comments made by peer reviewers as 2.35 with a standard deviation of .619. Additional data is being collected but has not been tabulated at this time. Advice on ways to improve our assessment instruments will be solicited.

Training Tapes

Recently, Human Biology made another commitment to the academic services it provides its students by purchasing video equipment. We are now considering the possibility of making some pilot training tapes that could be used for a variety of purposes and in a variety of ways. Although videos should not and could not replace direct contact with Writing Assistants and students, they could be aids when writing workshops are presented. Tapes could be used to provide guidelines for specific topics students are investigating; e.g., what are the key points to check for in a policy paper, or how is an outline for a research paper constructed, or

what constitutes a good response to an essay question. This is something we are going to try!

Beyond the Core

There is a positive attitude that pervades Human Biology that the writing center is a place to get help and support. In large measure the success of the Writing Program rests directly on the skill and dedication of the Writing Assistants. The half-time person is supported by the School of Humanities and Sciences and the quarter-time person receives support from Human Biology. In our experience, it is essential that these billets be filled by people who have had direct experience with the Core either as a former student or as a Teaching Assistant. The demands of the position and the Writing Assistants' credibility depends on familiarity with the course content and its organization. Our efforts are not confined exclusively to the Core although there is no question that this is the target of most of our energies. Other endeavors include support for students engaged in Honors, Internships, and Education Policy courses. Help is extended to students preparing proposals for the declaration of the major, or research grants, or for personal statements for admission to graduate and professional schools.

Summary and Conclusions

One of the very best features of Human Biology is its commitment to meet the needs of students and its ability to respond quickly to new ideas and opportunities. Because Human Biology is an interdisciplinary program, it exemplifies how writing can be integrated across-the-curriculum. The writing program has a solid base and is now a vital, integrated part of Human Biology. We are optimistic that the writing program will continue to thrive and get better as we move forward.